

Marsh-Billings National Historical Park Established

Bruce Craig

On August 26, 1992, President Bush signed legislation (Public Law 102-350) establishing the Marsh-Billings National Historical Park in Woodstock, VT. The new 555-acre park was the boyhood home of George Perkins Marsh, the author of *Man and Nature*, an important mid-19th-century book that helped to stimulate the early conservation movement.

Marsh-Billings is Vermont's first national park unit other than the portion of the Appalachian Trail that passes through the state. Because the site's owners, Laurance and Mary Rockefeller, agreed to donate the entire estate to the National Park Service— together with both a handsome maintenance endowment of \$7.5 million and funds for the preparation of the area's General Management Plan (a separate endowment was established to compensate the Town of Woodstock for anticipated lost property tax revenues), the legislation zipped through both the House and Senate national park authorizing committees.

Bills seeking to authorize the site were introduced in the House and Senate on November 26, 1991 (CRM, Vol. 15: No. 1). The House bill was dropped in the hopper by Representative Bernard Sanders (I-VT) while Senators James Jeffords (R-VT) and Patrick Leahy (D-VT) introduced in the Senate an identical bill to establish the site. Hearings were conducted shortly after the bills were introduced, first before Senator Dale Bumpers' Subcommittee on Public Lands, National Parks and Forests, and then by Representative Bruce Vento's Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands.

While there was never any doubt about the national significance of the site (the property was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1967) or that the legislation would pass muster with Congress, there was some concern in the preservation and conservation community whether the site was the best site to tell the story of the early conservation movement. The release of Robin Winks' timely biography, *Frederick Billings: a Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), provided a needed stimulus.

While George Perkins Marsh was nationally significant in his own right according to Winks, Frederick Billings, the Vermont-born lawyer, entrepreneur, and philanthropist who purchased the mansion from Marsh in 1869, was also a noted conservationist.

Billings reforested the hills around the mansion. He purchased additional land surrounding the site and experimented with the latest technology and scientific management principles in the surrounding farm and forest lands. Billings was so taken with Marsh's contributions to conservation that he even purchased Marsh's 12,000-volume library and donated the collection to the University of Vermont. Billings also played a role in

helping to establish Yosemite and Yellowstone national parks.

The significance of the Marsh-Billings site would not be complete, however, without recognition of the contributions of the property's last owners—Laurance and Mary French Rockefeller. Mrs. Rockefeller is a descendent of Frederick Billings and over the years she and her husband continued the tradition set by the mansion's previous owners in preserving the site and its surrounding pastoral 19th-century landscape. Also like the previous owners of the estate, the Rockefellers have long been strong advocates and supporters of the American conservation movement, having played important roles in the establishment of several other national park units. They follow a long-established Whig tradition of using personal wealth for public benefit. Marsh-Billings then not only is a worthy national park unit because of its significant historical association with George Perkins Marsh but also because of the site's ability to interpret the role that philanthropists have played in the conservation movement.

Despite an anticipated \$900,000 annual operating budget for Marsh-Billings NHP, the Department of the Interior enthusiastically supported the establishment of the site, largely because of the unprecedented gifts by the Rockefellers that would significantly reduce the costs of establishing and managing the national park unit. Director James Ridenour summed it up: "Philanthropy provided a way for things to happen that might not happen otherwise. The long tradition of philanthropy that the parks have enjoyed through the years continues to provide the Service with an all-important margin of excellence."

Bruce Craig is the cultural resources coordinator for the National Parks and Conservation Association.